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## THREE RULES FOR THE COMMA

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In a recent number of the *English Journal*<sup>1</sup> appears a somewhat violent article in which the author attacks all existing systems of punctuation, first, on the ground that their rules are sometimes invalid, secondly on the ground that the rules fail to teach punctuation to students.

I do not propose to take issue with the indignant writer, Mr. C. H. Ward. His charge that most systems of punctuation merely copy earlier systems is, in part at least, well founded. The problem, however, as a whole, is not so simple as Mr. Ward seems to think it. Let us take the comma alone. In the first place, does the comma represent a pause in spoken discourse, or does it appeal in its present-day usage mainly to the eye; that is, does it make an intellectual appeal, without any immediate reference to the sound of the sentence? Or—a third possibility—does it mark a sort of psychological pause, a pause imagined rather than heard?

That verse may have psychological accents has been pointed out by Professor Alden in a recent article, "The Mental Side of Metrical Form."<sup>2</sup> May there not be a mental side to prose pauses in reading, or to supposed prose pauses? "Half the mistakes of prosodic theory," says Professor Alden, "come from supposing that a mental beat must needs receive physical expression." Or again, quoting from a previous article,<sup>3</sup> he says, "So long as the mind hears the implied accents in their places, the number and position of the accents which actually occur is [*sic*] of no consequence."<sup>4</sup> Now, if a reader can hear a "mental beat," if "the mind hears the implied accents" in poetry, may not the mind also supply in prose

<sup>1</sup> "Punctator Gingriens," September, 1915, p. 451.

<sup>2</sup> *Modern Language Review*, July, 1914, p. 297.

<sup>3</sup> *Quarterly Review*, July, 1911, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> He also quotes Verrier on the point, *Questions de métrique anglaise*, 1912, p. 7.

pauses which would not actually occur in speaking? In such case the comma would mark a theoretical pause which the mind, generalizing from other sentences of somewhat similar structure, thinks ought to appear at that point. For example, in "No, sir, I thank you," there is no pause before "sir," but there is a comma—that is, a theoretical pause by analogy with sentences where there is a real pause, such as, "This, my dear madam, is the truth."

Let us then assume, for the time, that all commas represent pauses, real or imagined, and see if we can classify such pauses by any general principles. For a list of the different uses or omissions of commas, I have taken the *General Rules for Punctuation* of the late Adams Sherman Hill.<sup>1</sup> Here the rules which apply to commas alone number thirty-six. They are classified under ten larger headings. Closer scrutiny, however, will show that thirty-two of the rules, comprising all under nine of the ten larger headings, may be explained by three simple principles. And it can furthermore be shown that these three principles or rules are in close conformity with current habits of speech; that is, they satisfactorily explain commas on the supposition that they mark pauses for the ear, or theoretical pauses similar to those for the ear though not actually observed in reading.<sup>2</sup> The remaining four rules, grouped under the tenth heading, I have been unable to bring into any such scheme. These are the four rules of Section XX of Hill. They read:

#### PUNCTUATION IN THE SERVICE OF THE EYE

1. A comma sometimes serves to distinguish the component parts of a sentence from one another, thus enabling the reader more readily to catch the meaning of the whole. Where, for example, a number of words which

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted separately, Cambridge, 1905. For systems of later date, cf. *A Manual for Writers* by Professor Manly, of the University of Chicago, and Mr. John Arthur Powell, of Chicago, 1913, chap. v, "Punctuation." The authors in this chapter follow John Wilson's *A Treatise on English Punctuation*, a usage that particularly excites "Punctator Gingriens"; but they also follow the *Manual of Style* of the University of Chicago Press, a method of procedure entirely in keeping with "Punctator's" suggested reforms.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Manly and Mr. Powell (*loc. cit.*) generalize with regard to the comma in the following quoted passage, but the generalization is too vague to assume the character of a definite principle: "The comma is 'used to indicate the smallest interruptions in continuity of thought or grammatical construction, the marking of which contributes to clearness.'"

together form the object or one of the objects of a verb, precede instead of following the verb, they should be set off by a comma when perspicuity requires it (*a*); but not otherwise (*b*).

2. A subject-nominative may need to be distinguished from its verb, either because of some peculiarity in the juxtaposition of words at the point where the comma is inserted (*c*), or because of the length and complexity of the subject-nominative (*d*).

The three general principles that cover all the other rules are these:

First, any omitted word must have its place supplied by a comma. This applies to the cases where the words are supposed to be omitted only, or where the sentence merely sounds as if a word were omitted, as well as to cases where they are really omitted:<sup>1</sup> "The events took place at Cumberland, Maryland." "In" is omitted. A series of terms may be regarded as normally connected by conjunctions, all of which, except the last, are omitted in practice: "He was brave, honest and truthful."

Second, any long parenthetical expression—by which is meant any long expression that can be omitted without rendering the remainder of the sentence obscure—and any short parenthetical expression of which the parenthetical nature is strongly marked, are segregated by commas. Of such character are: (*a*) appositive expressions, "This power rests with the President, the head of the army"; (*b*) unrestrictive relative clauses, "This power rests with the President, who is the head of the army"; (*c*) grammatical parentheses, "The President, being the head of the army, has this power"; (*d*) many adverbial expressions, "Greatly to my sorrow, I confess it"; (*e*) vocative words, "Finally, brethren, we come to the last point."

Third, clauses that may be regarded as potentially independent simple sentences, joined together for convenience or brevity, should be separated by commas: "He arrived, but he arrived too late." Or, "After we arrived, we found our mission vain." In this second case, "After we arrived," may be regarded as parenthetical, but it is more nearly a modification of a preliminary idea, "We arrived," which is then followed by a subsequent idea, "Then we found our mission vain."

<sup>1</sup> A sentence such as, "He is brave, she beautiful," omits the comma after "she" to avoid confusing two commas, and is therefore an exception.

These rules appeal to the ear for explanation. The omitted word leaves a pause in the place from which it has disappeared. Hence the comma. The mental ear—to use a phrase akin to that of Professor Alden—hears a pause in other cases where no word has really been omitted, because the mind, generalizing from similar experiences in syntax, assumes that a word was omitted. Hence, again, the comma. The parenthetic expression, in the mouths of good speakers, is always set off, instinctively. Often such expressions are uttered in a lower tone than that used for the context, to emphasize the parenthetic nature. But always there are pauses, hence commas. Finally, two independent sentences would naturally be separated by a full stop. When they are run together to form a compound sentence, the stop remains as a weakened but still existent pause, and is indicated by a comma.

Some of Hill's examples may need special interpretation. In Section I he gives exceptional commas in the following sentences: "He suddenly plunged, and sank." Again, "'Twas certain he could write, and cipher too." Again, "The college, the clergy, the lawyers, the wealthy merchants, were against me," the comma in question in this last case being that after "merchants." These are all treated as special cases of words in a series, but their theoretical explanation, as distinct from their classification for practical ends, is that of Section XX, already quoted. They are punctuation for expediency.

Another example of Hill does not appear to fit into any scheme at all. It is the comma before the conjunction introducing the last term of a series: e.g., "He had a hard, grey, and sullen face." But many authorities refuse to acknowledge this comma; for instance, the *Century Dictionary*. If it is the only case that does not fit into our theory, it may reasonably be regarded as an error.

An example of Hill somewhat more difficult to explain is:

And feeling all along the garden wall,  
Lest he should swoon and tumble and be found,  
Crept to the gate, and open'd it, and closed.

The comma in the last line may be regarded as coming under our Rule III. There are plainly three ideas, sharply distinguished from

one another, being potentially three simple sentences. In the previous line, the confused man thinks of swooning, tumbling, and being found, all at once. They are practically a single idea to him. In the following line he performs three successive acts, each of which requires a separate act of volition, and between which there were presumably pauses. Hence they are practically three distinct ideas, and are separated by commas. Compare also the example of Hill, "For his sake, empires had risen, and flourished, and decayed." Other cases of Hill more difficult to explain appear in his section devoted to dependent clauses. Such clauses are sometimes not set off by commas. These clauses are from their nature grammatical parts of speech that serve to fill out the principal clauses. They are adverbial, adjective, or noun clauses in import.<sup>1</sup> "I doubt whether he saw the true limits of taste." The dependent clause introduced by "whether" is the direct object of "doubt," and at the same time is not long enough to lead the mind off into a new idea. Hence it is a grammatical part of the principal clause. When, however, such a clause precedes the principal clause, it may appeal to the mind as a distinct concept. "That he was a wise man, no one can doubt." Here the concept "He was a wise man" is completed. Then the mind remembers it as a whole merely as "This fact," and the subsequent idea is "This fact no one can doubt." Compare "I know this, that what I say is true," or the Anglo-Saxon construction "Ic þæt wât, þæt ûs gescildeþ weoruda Dryhten," Andr. or compare "Ne ðurfon wê ðæs wênan, þæt ûs wundorcynig wille eard âlêfan." Cd. (See other examples in Bosworth-Toller, *þæt.*)

The commas of Hill's Section XX, which do not fit into this classification, may be roughly designated as commas for expediency. They are casuistical commas designed to help out the embarrassed syntax when it becomes confused.

In some individual cases these commas may be brought under the three rules. Take, for example, the sentence quoted by Hill,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Manly and Powell, *op. cit.*, p. 108: "Do not use a comma before clauses introduced by such conjunctions [such as 'and,' 'but,' 'if,' 'while,' 'as,' 'whereas,' 'since,' 'because,' 'when,' 'after,' 'although,' etc., especially when a change of subject takes place] if the preceding clause is *not logically complete without them.*" The italics are mine.

“Even the kind of public interest which Englishmen care for, he held in very little esteem.” Here we have, in idea at any rate, a compound sentence. For no one takes the initial part of the sentence as a whole to be the object of “held in little esteem.” The initial idea is finished.<sup>1</sup> Then it becomes simply “that” in the mind of the reader, whether his lips pronounce “that” or not; and “that” is the object of the second sentence, which is independent in reality, though written as a clause.

Not all of Hill’s cases in Section XX, however, can be so explained. There must be some rule for them that we have not yet detected.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the example quoted before, “That he was a wise man, no one can doubt.”